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THE GAZETTE'S VIEW

Better animal-control system badly needed

It may be, as claimed by the management of the Berger Blanc animal pound, that an investigative report on the facility that accuses it of systematic cruelty to the creatures cast into its charge was somewhat sensationalist and biased, and that steps to correct the situation have been taken.

Even if that is the case, however, the shocking images captured by hidden cameras at the facility are undeniable and attest that a better system of animal control is badly needed in this city.

The documentary that has generated an outcry by animal lovers and animal-rights activists was put together by the Radio-Canada investigative program Enquête, which infiltrated the for-profit cat- and dog-disposal operation and filmed what the Quebec order of veterinarians called broad cruelty to animals, inappropriate euthanasia practices, unclean premises and non-respect for laws and regulations.

While the cruelties captured on camera are inexcusable, it must be recognized that Berger Blanc has been confided a dirty job. It has contracts with various regional municipalities and 10 Montreal boroughs to dispose of some 35,000 stray or abandoned dogs and cats in an average year, a task that might understandably result in a certain desensitizing of feeling for the animals on the part of the staff assigned to do the snuffing.

According to the local SPCA, the root of the problem is a severe stray-animal overpopulation on and around Montreal Island that is the inevitable result of a purely reactive and inefficient animal-control system, along with a deplorable lack of responsibility on the part of many animal owners. The animal-protection association says that on average at least 50,000 animals across the region are abandoned every year to animal shelters or for-profit pounds. In Toronto, with a larger population, the number is only 16,000.

What makes a big difference is that in Toronto, as in the case in Calgary, animal control is a municipally managed service and significantly more funding is made available for the purpose than in Montreal, where the SPCA estimates the outlay for the purpose is about one-tenth of what is necessary to do a proper job of ensuring humane treatment standards.

Other measures that can and should be undertaken include offering free or low-cost neutering as a public service and requiring dealers to neuter their stock before sale. There might also be stricter criteria for adoptions to determine if those taking on an animal have the time and resources to properly care for it.

Animal-rights activists make a credible claim that Quebec lags considerably behind the rest of the country in animal-welfare enforcement, and that Canada in turn lags behind the U.S. and even more so behind European countries. It is a worthwhile endeavour to undertake to catch up in this area, not only for the sake of the animals but because it has been well established that being good to animals makes us better people and fosters a more compassionate society all around.

YOUR VIEWS

Traffic-flow woes

» Re: "Adding more signs won't stop Montreal's traffic woes" (Opinion, April 23).

It's so frustrating reading another article about traffic problems in Montreal where the writer again fails to identify a real, proven alternative to stop signs.

Almost everywhere in the world outside of North America people use roundabouts, or rotaries. Call them what you will, they work.

And you don't have to send a committee to Europe to see them in action. Just pop down to Nuns' Island, where the main junction is a roundabout. It works perfectly.

There are many versions of the roundabout as well. For instance, mini-roundabouts combined with "Give Way" signs would be ideal for streets like Fleet, where the dominant east-west traffic shouldn't have to stop every 50 feet.

Roundabouts can work with traffic lights as well for peak traffic periods, so you wouldn't have to endure situations like seeing a lifetime's worth of traffic lights suddenly turn red down the entire length of Park Ave. just as you're approaching the first light at 5 a.m.

Roundabouts also avoid those annoying standoffs when four cars arrive at a stop simultaneously, because they prioritize traffic flow in a logical and proven way.

And of course, roundabouts make for more economically and environmentally efficient traffic flows. If cars don't have to stop-start all the time, they conserve fuel. This lowers noise and air pollution.

So instead of the current stop-sign vs.-traffic-light orthodoxy, maybe it's time to look for a more roundabout solution to traffic-flow problems. Heaven knows Montreal drivers deserve a break for once!

Neil Oakshott
Rosemère

» Re: "Adding more signs won't stop Montreal's traffic woes" (Opinion, April 23).

Unfortunately there are factors that traffic consultant Ottavio Galella fails to recognize. Stop signs don't save lives or prevent accidents. They are merely an effective tax, a way for cities to collect money from citizens by issuing $150 tickets to meet police quotas.

Mr. Galella also makes a very strong argument for reserved bus lanes to encourage drivers to abandon their cars. This is wonderful in theory. But people love their cars in North America. They prefer a comfortable, air-conditioned, private-stereo-filled automobile to a crowded, dirty, slow, inefficient bus. People ride the bus out of necessity, not by choice.

It is time we started planning for an efficient and safe road network to serve drivers.

Isaac Alt
Montreal

» Re: Vicky Marcus's letter urging that right turns on red lights be allowed on Montreal Island (Your views, April 25).

The grass always looks greener in the neighbours' yard is what I say. We have something like four traffic-light-controlled intersections in my area. Half of them have right-turn-on-red restrictions because of a school and other reasons (I have no idea what they are), and we have nowhere as much traffic as Montreal. So I imagine allowing right turns on reds in Montreal would bring a whole new slew of these "no-right-turn-on-red" signs in Montreal on just about every corner.

The truth of the matter is that Montrealers can't make right turns on reds because they don't even know how to interpret a stop sign. So please, spare me the "trust us to exercise good judgment" comment. They would be zipping through those turns like crazy Heck, you can't even turn on a green light, there's so many pedestrians, and they get killed by buses that also have a green light. And you want permission to turn on reds?

Dominique Gourdon
Notre-Dame-de-l'Île-Perrot

» Re: Vicky Marcus's comments (Your views, April 25).

As a crawler since 1966, walker since 1967, cyclist since 1970, marathon runner since 1981, and car driver since 1982, I see all sides of this issue and take offence to Ms. Marcus's assumption that we all "relish the many advantages of right (turns) on red."

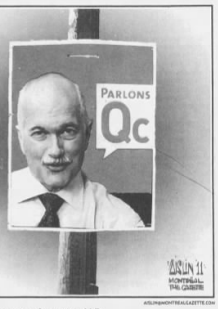
As a runner with crossing priority, I have come "face to headlight" with many a vehicle, and frankly don't "relish it." It seems her argument and those of others is the same tired refrain every time there is a price hike in fuel. We all have options, and mine is to use my feet, bicycle, two-door Hyundai Accent, and brains.

When you own an SUV with a gas tank that costs $100 to fill, don't blame me or complain about traffic snarls and all the pollution from red lights.

The reason why Transport Quebec has not made right turns on red legal throughout Quebec is the simple fact that Quebecers have not yet mastered the skill of learning how to stop first, be it "Stop" or "Arrêt."

Gary Rush
Laval

The Nuns' Island roundabout: a better solution than installing more stop signs?



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YOUR VIEWS

Free speech cuts both ways

» Re: "Free speech in a PC society" (Gazette, April 23).

Juan Rodriguez's article had many interesting and provocative points, but the comment on the firing of Helen Thomas, previously considered the doyenne of the Washington press corps and usually allowed the first question in presidential press briefings, was entirely euphemistic. You said that she "criticized Israel for the Palestinian problem." In fact she said that Israel was "occupied land" and when questioned added that the Jews ought to "go home." Where was "home," she was asked. The reply: Germany, Poland, America. This may give the reader more understanding of why her comments were considered "unacceptable."

Barbara G. Haskel
Côte-des-Neiges

» I had hoped that Juan Rodriguez's piece would be an incisive exposé on the decline of free speech in the western world.

Alas, it is not. He has conflated two separate issues that obscure the nature of the problem. Politically correct speech is unquestionable a resurgence of Victorian prudery, but aside from that is not very problematic, save the extraordinary conformity it has inspired. Neither is the exclusion of Elizabeth May from the election debates. The media can and do exclude all sorts of opinions. It's their property.

The issue that is crucially important, and that Rodriguez fails to address, is that in Europe (and Canada) one can be prosecuted for making any statement deemed offensive by any minority even if the statement is true. It has been explicitly stated in Austria that the truth of an assertion is no defence. Right now, Geert Wilders and Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff are on trial for making statements about Islam that some found offensive. These trials, on which the future of free speech in the EU depends, have received almost no coverage in Canada. Here in Canada, columnist Mark Steyn narrowly avoided prosecution by the Canadian Human Right Commission for making comments offensive to Islam.

This is the issue that is central to the debate. WikiLeaks, puerile thought and offensive language are problematic but pale in comparison to the tyranny of the state thought police.

John Purdy
Kirkland

» I would like to congratulate Juan Rodriguez for his lucid and timely article. Freedom of speech is a misunderstood, fundamental right in a functioning society. It is specifically when what is being said is controversial or not in line with majority opinion that free speech is most important.

I do disagree with one of the examples: Bill Maher may have lost his show, but there is nothing wrong with boycotts of people who say controversial things. Free speech cuts both ways, after all.

But it was the height of irony for me to turn the page and see letter-writer Marie-Pierre Warren complain, after seeing Communist Party signs protesting Israeli "apartheid" (Your views, April 23), "I find it highly offensive that those words were allowed to be on the billboard of an electoral campaign, and I don't understand why there isn't more control over the slogans used on the billboards of political parties."

This is exactly why freedom of speech requires constant vigilance: because it will constantly be under attack by those who disagree with what is said.

Thomas Awad
Montreal

REUTERS FILE PHOTO

Helen Thomas went farther than just criticizing Israel.

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